

Jesse Kline: 'How to Blow Up a Pipeline' film's reprehensible attempt to mainstream terrorism

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Body

If you've ever wondered what you'd get if terrorist propaganda had sex with an "Ocean's 11" ripoff, the new movie "How to Blow Up a Pipeline" provides the answer.

The film([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_to_Blow_Up_a_Pipeline_\(film\)#External_links](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_to_Blow_Up_a_Pipeline_(film)#External_links)), which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September and was released on video last month, follows a group of young people as they try to blow up an oil pipeline in Texas. Their goal is to spark a revolution that will make fossil fuels uneconomic and bring about an end to climate change.

"How to Blow up a Pipeline" is loosely based on a nonfiction book of the same name by eco-Marxist Andreas Malm, in which he argues(<https://newrepublic.com/article/162247/andreas-malm-blow-up-pipeline-climate-direct-action>) that peaceful climate protests are incapable of achieving any meaningful results and that a widespread campaign to destroy fossil-fuel infrastructure is the only way to save humanity from imminent demise.

Malm's arguments are expounded by the characters, all of whom have been hurt by climate change or the oil industry in some way. The eco-terrorist ringleader, Xochitl (played by Ariela Barer), is mourning the death of her mother, who perished in a "freak heat wave." Her friend, Theo (Sasha Lane), has advanced leukemia from living near a refinery.

The others, all typical left-wing university-age youth, are alarmed about climate change and eager to join the cause. The one exception is Dwayne (Jake Weary), a pickup-driving, gun-toting redneck who's recruited by Xochitl's friend Shawn (Marcus Scribner) because he knows the area that's being targeted and lost his house fighting to stop a pipeline from being built through his property.

As is typical in Hollywood these days, the group is incredibly diverse - a Latina, a Native-American man, a pair of Black lesbians, a privileged white boy, etc. - though the forced diversity feels less out of place in a film that wears its progressive values on its sleeve.

Malm's case about the uselessness of non-violent protest is given voice by Xochitl, who, following her mother's funeral, becomes disillusioned while planning a campus divestment protest. "I'm having trouble feeling like any of this matters," she tells Shawn. "By the time any market solution does shit, billions of people will be dead."

Later on, we meet Michael (Forrest Goodluck), who picks a fight with an oil worker before returning home to lecture his mother about the futility of her conservationist efforts. In both cases, the message is clear: only through violence and vandalism can meaningful change be achieved.

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Xochitl comes up with the idea of "attacking the things that are killing us ... like actual sabotage, property destruction," at her divestment campaign meeting. In another part of the country, Michael, battered and bruised from his recent street fight, takes a job at a supermarket, where he uses his employee discount to buy bomb-making materials and teaches himself how to build improvised explosive devices.

Daniel Goldhaber, who directed the film and co-wrote the script, intended to make a heist movie, figuring that if he could make the characters seem cool, it would "shift the cultural narrative around climate tactics," and give people "hope" that something can be done. That something, of course, being terrorism.

"What's exciting about how we use the heist genre in this film is that it is about familiarizing audiences with ideas that are so far cast out of the mainstream," Goldhaber told Esquire magazine(<https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a43531772/how-to-blow-up-a-pipeline-daniel-goldhaber-interview/>). "The surprise comes from seeing a story about something that the contemporary culture has hammered home is bad and you're actually feeling like maybe it's not that bad after all. That's a role the heist film has had since time immemorial. It's been a genre about collective action, specifically addressing inequality."

I've never seen heist movies as ringing endorsements of bank robbery or Robin Hood-style wealth redistribution, but I guess art really is in the eye of the beholder. At the very least, "How to Blow Up a Pipeline" offers a unique take on the genre by forgoing the classic trope of a ringleader setting out to find accomplices that have the unique skills necessary to pull off a given job.

Instead, the movie begins with the characters converging on a cabin in rural Texas, where they start making explosives and digging up a section of the pipeline. That most of them make their way to the Lone Star State in pickup trucks and older-model gas-powered vehicles may seem hypocritical at first, but speaks to the movie's main point: that individual measures are meaningless, as global warming can only be solved through drastic collective action.

The audience is introduced to the characters through flashbacks detailing how each one has been aggrieved by the oil industry or the effects of climate change and how they managed to find each other. The majority of the film's tension comes not from disagreements among the characters or the threat of getting caught, but from watching this group of amateur saboteurs almost blow themselves up time and again.

The movie doesn't ignore questions about the morality of eco-terrorism, but as in Malm's book, in which he asserts that saving millions of people from climate change justifies violence, arguments to the contrary are dismissed out of hand.

When the plot is originally conceived, Shawn expresses concern that, "We could end up killing somebody or creating an ecological disaster." To which Xochitl responds: "Sabotage is messy." Later, the group wrestles with whether they're terrorists, but concludes that the Boston Tea Party, MLK and Jesus were also terrorists, and that "revolution has collateral damage."

It's hard to imagine this type of reasoning being so well received by critics - the film has a 94 per cent rating on Rotten Tomatoes(https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/how_to_blow_up_a_pipeline) and was hailed by Vice magazine(<https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgyvgn/how-to-blow-up-a-pipeline-is-the-movie-everyone-needs-to-see-right-now>) as a "movie everyone needs to see right now" - in another context. Such as a motion picture called "How to Fly Planes Into a Building" justifying the actions of Islamic terrorists.

Despite the eco-terrorists in the movie taking pains to ensure their vandalism doesn't result in the loss of life, which Islamists certainly do not do, the analogy is not so far off, as both groups think they have good reason to justify their use of force. And sometimes they have common cause: in his book, Malm praises a 2019 attack on Saudi refineries launched by Houthi rebels, saying that, "No single action in the history of sabotage and guerrilla war had achieved a commensurate break on the pumping of oil."

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The Houthi movement's slogan(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Houthi_movement#Slogan) - "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam" - tells you pretty much all you need to know about the morality of its adherents, and anyone who would rationalize their extremism.

Which brings me to the main issue with "How to Blow Up a Pipeline." As a piece of pure entertainment, it is actually quite enjoyable. The plot moves along briskly and the tension is palpable as the amateur bombers try to evade getting caught and risk life and limb attempting to rig explosives and attach them to sections of the pipeline.

Yet despite Goldhaber's claim that he didn't want to "over-editorialize the subject matter," the film is constantly hitting viewers over the head with its environmental propaganda - everything from the dialogue, to the characters' backstories, to the ambient audio and backdrops of smog-spewing factories is designed to paint a picture of ecological disaster. And the movie's overarching message - that vigilante violence and the destruction of private property for the collective good is justified - is morally reprehensible.

"How to Blow Up a Pipeline" can be streamed on video-on-demand platforms starting at \$4.99, but capitalist viewers who have qualms about supporting a piece of eco-Marxist propaganda would be better served by finding a copy of Paul Johansson's 2011 adaptation of "Atlas Shrugged."

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